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ABSTRACT

Teaching practices in Italy, where teachers combine three different methods for teaching reading, may provide insight into ways to improve methodologies in the United States. The first method is the natural method, which, unlike American methods, teaches reading and writing simultaneously with the emphasis on writing. The teacher writes as children dictate, then the children copy the teacher's writing, first words then sentences. The second method of teaching reading and writing is the phonic/syllabic, or traditional, method in which vowels are introduced, then consonants, then whole words and word parts, all reinforced by writing. The third method is the global method, which is rooted in vocabulary, particularly idiomatic expressions. Qualifying or signal words that change the meaning of the text are stressed with children writing an essay or reading a story following exercises using such words. The school printing press is also widely used by Italian children. Because of the emphasis on writing, far fewer books are available for children's use in Italy. Instead, extensive use is made of newsprint, chart paper, index cards, and teacher made materials. The concept of play, in the educational rather than recreational sense, is also predominant in Italian schools, reducing stress and intensity for children as they learn to read and write. (HTH)

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Beginning Reading in Italy

Daniel Tutolo

With the present emphasis on multicultural education, teaching reading in other countries is of interest to educators. Perhaps teaching practice in other countries will provide insight into ways to improve methodology in the United States. This paper is a description of the beginning reading process in Italy. With the cooperation of the Italian Cultural Institute of New York City the author visited nine schools in Milan and Bologna. During this time conversations took place with over 55 teachers and administrative officials at all levels pre-school through university. The focus of the visit was to determine philosophy, methodology and materials used in the beginning reading process.

Italian schools are successful in teaching beginning reading, at least as successful as United States schools. Thorndike stated differences between developed countries--here, Italy and the United States--are of modest dimensions. Though Italians seem to score higher on reading comprehension and word knowledge as measured in ten-year-olds, these overall averages do not seem important or readily interpretable.[1]

Over the years, I had attributed the success to the regularity of the language. Some languages have perfect alphabetic systems with highly predictable sound symbol correspondence while other languages range from imperfect to extremely imperfect. Bloomfield concluded that Italian was an imperfect system and English was an extremely imperfect system.[2] Thus it should be easier to learn to read Italian than to learn to read English.

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Downing agreed that the writing system is an important variable in the learning to read process. A perceived mismatch between the writing system and the language in which the child is expected to respond is an important cause of difficulty in the early stages of learning to read and write.[3] However, he went on to say that the relative difficulty of literary acquisition in different languages is a complex problem certainly extending beyond simple sound-symbol correspondence. In my mind this issue is not resolved and must await additional study. Assuming reading parity I went to Italy to determine how children learn to read their native language in the hope that I would find some approaches used in Italy that are not used in the United States. I found two such approaches and will report them later in this paper.

Organization of Elementary Schools

Schools are in session Monday through Saturday usually from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Since 1975-76, in response to popular demand, more and more schools are open in the afternoon as well. Children attend grades one through five with the same teacher assigned, thus allowing the teacher to follow carefully the development of each child. At the end of the fifth year children must pass essay examinations for promotion to the scuola media (middle school). Many children failed these final examinations and were thus retained in the elementary school "bocciato". In 1968 reforms began to correct this problem. The book, Letter to a Teacher, written by eight teenage peasant boys captured the hearts of the Italian population and served as a catalyst for legislative reform directed toward teaching process,

teacher attitude and promotion policy. Implementation of these reforms continues today.[4]

Report cards (sceda personale) reflecting student progress are sent home twice a year. Parent conferences are scheduled Saturday mornings on a turn basis. Additional conferences are scheduled either at the request of parent or teacher. Every three months there is an open house (assemblea di classe) where parents are provided direction about the curriculum of the school.

Conversations with the teachers took place in the nine schools with anywhere from three to twelve teachers present. Normally, I met with administrators separately, usually in an informal setting. Both teachers and administrators were open and responsive. I limited my questions to "Tell me how you do this" or "Tell me what works and why". Commonly, teachers would ask why I wasn't questioning them about problems that existed in Italian schools. My response always included the following question. "Do you think I need to travel 8,000 miles to find problems? We already have enough problems in the United States. I want to know what is working for you and how children are learning to read." I believe this attitude contributed greatly to the openness I experienced. The free flow of information never stopped.

Philosophy

The underpinnings of the Italian system can be traced from Rousseau, Froebel, Pestalozzi, Kilpatrick and Dewey. The activity movement begun and perpetuated in Romantic Naturalism is alive and functioning in Italian elementary school curricula. Uniformly, educators regarded Dewey and Experimentalism (Pragmatism) as a base for the Italian

educational system. This is especially true in the teaching of communication skills.

This is not to say that more traditional philosophy is not much in evidence in Italy, especially in rural parts of the South. Stress exists between traditionalists and more modern pedagogists, often younger teachers. Idealism, which encourages development of the intellect and cultivation of mind are central to the purposes of some teachers. Notions of a set curriculum where communication of the culture takes place through basic skill instruction remains and can be found even in urban cosmopolitan areas such as Milan.

Realism, too, is very much in evidence in Italian elementary schools. The influence of the Catholic church is ever present as school calendars observe religious holidays. Neo-Scholastic thinking is rooted in educational and political institutions as witness the Christian Democratic Party is still is power. While Italians seem to be moving to the left politically, they remain conservative in the moral and social sphere. Faith and reason continue to be regarded by most Italian teachers as equally reliable methods of attaining truth.

Scientific Realism (Behaviorism) with notions of programmed learning, behavioral objectives and reinforcement got a start in the 1960's. A plan existed to develop extensive materials and computer assisted instruction to facilitate learning in schools. As a result of questions about the base of behaviorism, as well as economic constraints in Italy, the move to a materials revolution, including hardware and software, has waned. As a consequence, behaviorism has had little influence on Italian education.

Beliefs related to Existentialism are growing in Italian elementary school practice. There is much emphasis on the person which leads to an ever growing feeling that knowledge is determined by its value to the individual. More and more emphasis is being placed on self choosing and self knowledge as the child progresses in school. Choosing and the responsibility for choice are presently being reflected in curriculum modification.

In summary, while the philosophical base for Italian schools is pragmatism (experimentalism) there is evidence of idealism, realism (neo-scholasticism) and existentialism. How the political shift to the left toward Communism is affecting and will affect Italian education remains an intriguing question.

Methodology

There are three widely utilized methods of teaching reading in Italy. In frequency of use these are the natural method (methodo naturale), the phonic-syllable (fonetico-sillaba), and the global method (methodo globale). Official study plans of the central government of Italy recommend rather than prescribe particular methods to be used but do suggest that whatever method is used be intelligently based on child psychology.[5] Several teachers mentioned this freedom to select methods and tend to guard this right jealously. Because of this freedom teachers tend to be eclectic rather than confined to any one method.

The Natural Method

Often mentioned by teachers was the name Celestin Freinet and the natural method of teaching reading. His name was accompanied by the

names of Mialaret, another Frenchman, and Decoly, a Belgian. According to one teacher, all three have contributed to the natural method, but Freinet is seen as the originator. His methods and subject matter are the center of a movement spreading across Europe even today.[6]

Here are Freinet's principles for writing/reading instruction.[7]

1. By drawing and other forms of written expression the child begins to write. This leads later to the need to read.
2. This progression is through trial and error, not through rational principles.
3. Trial and error writing assumes interest on the part of the child, adequate materials available for instruction, teachers as models of appropriate language usage, and a favorable attitude toward writing on the part of the school.
4. Rules of grammar and usage are of no use in the intitial stages of writing.

The natural method, unlike common American methods, moves from writing to reading. Formal instruction in reading is delayed until a firm grasp of the writing process is in place through dictation, copying and finally writing words, phrases and sentences. Freinet expressed the concern "...the traditional school...approaches the problem of writing and reading backwards...."[8]

Presently in Italy the delay of reading instruction is more theoretical than real for the two processes go on simultaneously. Children dictate and the teacher writes on the chalkboard or on chart paper. The children copy the work from the board. In the beginning this copying may be a word or two; later, sentences are added. What is significant here is that present educational practice introduces

reading and writing simultaneously but the emphasis in the instructional program is on writing. Reading is confined to simple identification of words and phrases. Formal reading instruction designed to lead to understanding or comprehension is delayed until the children are ready. Commonly this may be the end of the first grade or beginning of the second.

Formal reading in its initial stages consists of the pronunciation of words. One teacher stated that when parents complain about the child's lack of understanding of print, she answers, "You must trust me, for comprehension will come later when the child is ready." Again at the risk of being redundant it is the emphasis that is different in our two countries. In America we begin reading instruction at about age six with emphasis on reading. Writing is often regarded as incidental to this process. In Italy writing/reading instruction begins at about age six as well but the emphasis is on writing--the reading is incidental. In the Italian curriculum reading and writing instruction are never separated. The two are bound together as parts of the language process. One principal remarked, it is inconceivable that reading and writing instruction can be separated.

The Phonic/Syllabic Method

The second most popular method of teaching reading/writing in Italy is the phonic/syllabic or traditional method. In many respects this is the most difficult of the reading approaches to describe for there were as many variations as teachers who described them. Nevertheless this general approach can be found in many beginning reading classes. Vowels are introduced first, followed by the consonants. In

the first month of school, reading instruction focuses on the vowel and consonant sounds as well as on the writing of vowel/consonant letters. There is a great deal of copying from the board while introducing letter sound and letter formation. The chalkboard is used extensively, as are teacher-made charts.

After the first month of school the children receive the first text, a set of practice exercises for vowel and consonant writing. Each page includes a short story with an accompanying picture. The teacher reads the story and children practice writing the key words. Often the teacher records these words on the chalkboard and a discussion of the story ensues. The children follow this discussion by illustrating main words, including nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, as they relate to the discussion. For example, the child might draw a picture of a girl wearing a red sweater.

Following this whole word instruction, the exercises shift emphasis to parts of the word, including common beginnings, common endings, syllables and emphasis on more common function words. While these function words do not carry meaning in and of themselves, they are indispensible to the writing/reading process. Apparently this sequence of instruction varies and many teachers depend to a great extent on the materials available.

The phonic syllabic approach includes some oral practice and a great deal of writing. One group of teachers I talked with felt that Italian students write too much in the beginning stages of learning to write/read. These teachers represent the largest inservice organization in Italy and are considered by administrators as "bravo" or outstanding teachers.[9] While we in America feel additional writing

is necessary some in Italy feel that too much writing is expected of children in the beginning writing/reading process.

While emphasis in the phonic syllabic approach is on parts of words and synthesizing these parts into whole words, it seemed clear that teachers may choose to emphasize the entire word during part of the instruction. There is a strong suggestion that teachers tend to be eclectic, responding intuitively to meet needs of children.

Global Method

The last method to be discussed in this paper is the global method or "methodo globale". It is useful to point out that teachers felt this approach was more applicable to enriched students for wide reading and extensive writing are expected. The central unit for instruction is the word. Prior to a reading/writing lesson the teacher puts on the board the vocabulary words to be used in the learning experience. The teacher proceeds to set purposes for the lesson, utilizing the vocabulary. Instruction follows in roots, prefixes, suffixes, and compound words. Often charts and word cards are available to supplement instruction. Great emphasis is placed on idiomatic expression in the instructional process. One teacher pointed out, while Italian is not as poetic as French, meaning is often communicated with figurative language. In addition, stress is made of qualifying words or signal words which change the meaning of the context. Charts and sentence cards with key words underlined such as--but, over, under, there, part of--are utilized to demonstrate how words influence meaning of context. Following an exercise of this type in vocabulary development, the children write an essay or read a story.

Teachers pointed out that the global method required fewer hours of instruction than the phonic syllabic method. Children are expected to understand the vocabulary and to use the vocabulary in reading and writing. Here again, teachers clearly take an eclectic view and borrow greatly from the three methodologies.

In summary, with the natural method children write their own experiences, with little attention to correct spelling in the initial stages. Students respond in writing to classroom instruction. In the phonic syllabic approach teachers stress practice on parts of words and synthesize these parts into whole words. In the global method emphasis is on whole words and students are expected--without extensive practice--to use these words in reading and writing.

Materials, Equipment, Supplies

As was pointed out earlier, teachers determine methods to employ and procedures to use in the beginning writing/reading process. A brief description of some of the materials, equipment and supplies may shed light on the procedures followed by teachers.

The school printing press is widely used throughout Italy. This idea of classroom printing was encouraged as early as 1924 by Celestin Freinet.[10] Here are Freinet's own words regarding the value of this approach.

> We have used printing in our school to deliver students and teachers from the tyranny of dead textbooks and as means of keeping pace with children's natural daily activities. A printing press makes it possible to compose and print in the classroom the gist of the day's doings and has resolved one of the most serious problems of primary education--that of adapting to the natural background of the child.

> The printing press gives new meaning to the teaching of grammar. Children develop a grammatical sense and the theoretic knowledge without any special drill, dull exercises and memorization of rules. Arithmetic becomes an integral part of the life of the children. As we record local events we provide first glimmering of the historic sense. By reading school newspapers from our sister schools we add to these early impressions. We formulate a simple method without the boasting often found in textbooks and so bring the subject within the range and compass of childhood.
>
> Geography too becomes a rational and living study. We are learning to know other countries with study of climate, production and customs as seen through the eyes of children. In short, with the use of classroom printing we have abolished hypocritical teaching of morality and embrace cooperative efforts to lead to the good life. This new procedure helps renew spontaneous activity in all that concerns children's fundamental needs.[11]

These strong words by Freinet himself are mirrored by Italian teachers. All schools I visited utilized classroom printing. The small hand letters, both upper and lower case, are packaged in a container about 18 inches by 24 inches, along with the basic common symbols found in newspaper printing. Some will remember this printing system used in the United States but it never seemed to catch on as it did in Italy. On request the press is set up in the hall and a paid aide supervises the printing of the activity, newspaper or account. This practice reveals the commitment to the natural method and suggests once again emphasis on writing before reading.

> The UNESCO study of the teaching of reading stated: Great use is made of varied and abundant auxiliary equipment including moveable letters, large illustrated capital letters for individual age, words in series, letter games, small printing presses with rubber letters, personal and group collections of pictures, colored letters in series of different sizes and shape and newspaper and magazine cuttings. A great deal depends on the initiative, spirit of inventiveness and ingenuity of the teacher in the use made of these materials. Often this material is issued to teachers along with school primers.[12]

With emphasis on writing in the beginning writing/reading process, far fewer books are available for children's use in Italy. Neither

classroom nor central school libraries were in evidence. Readers available to all children begin as early as grade one and are used throughout the elementary school. Copy books are utilized for writing and these copybooks are used to report individual progress at parent conference time. Readers for grade one are a combination of primer and practice book. Students fill in blanks, draw lines to connect ideas and indicate sequence by cut and paste procedures.

Extensive use is made of newsprint, chart paper, index cards and other paper materials with emphasis on teacher-made materials. There seemed to be an adequate supply of paper for instructional purposes. Other materials such as cloth, wood, paints, yarn and metals are available but in very short supply. It seems clear that Italy has not experienced a materials revolution as we did in the United States. Within the last decade Italy was gearing for a program similar to our Title III but this program has been aborted due to lack of funds.

Activities

As reported earlier I had conversations with over 55 teachers throughout my visits to the schools. Many of these teachers used the word "giuoco" in conversation. This concept seems to be central in the minds of teachers as they explained the beginning writing/reading process. I asked Dr. Cesare Scurati, Professor of Pedagogy, Catholic University, Milan, for an explanation of this concept. "You must understand the Italian culture. It is different from the culture you know in America. In the Italian culture there is not a clear differentiation between work and play. The definition of giuoco in a dictionary is 'play'. But, it does not mean play in the recreational

sense. Giuoco means play toward an educational end. A lesson is taught and children giuoco as an extension of the lesson." Apparently this idea originates from the Froebelian notion that play is the work of children.

The concept of "giuoco" is an interesting one which can easily be found in the Italian culture. Adults as well as children "giuoco" as a prelude to learning. Italians stop in local coffee shops called bars for morning "expresso". Customers stand at the counter and interact with each other. Continuous banter takes place between bartender and customers and among the customers. Social, political and economic issues are discussed. Voices become animated and there is a tone of lightness or "play". Yet the discussions lead to important conclusions with broad cultural implications. In effect, Italians "giuoco" to an educational end--in this case to share the news of the day.

An elderly Balonese woman had been invited to school to talk to the children about living in the city as a child. This matriarch wore the traditional local costume with a bright yellow bandana around her head. She sat erect in her chair as she recounted the great times children had at the many festivals held throughout the year. After she left the teacher led a discussion of dialect differences and the need to respect the language of all. With little direction on the part of the teacher, students volunteered to dramatize the visit by the old woman. Children found a bright colored dress in what seemed to be a costume box and a bandana materialized from somewhere. One second grade girl role played the experience and after the simulation the teacher led a discussion.

The only counterpart I could find to "giuocoing" is our concept of informal dramatics including dramatic play, dramatization of literature, role playing, etc. Yet, somehow I am unhappy with this analogy. "Giuocoing" seems to be much more spontaneous than informal dramatics. In the United States, drama, even informal drama, is often an adjunct to the teaching/learning experience, while in Italy it seems to be an integral part of the experience. Few lessons seem to be complete without "giuocoing" to an educational end.

Contrast this with the American culture where play is rigidly separated from work. Many parents will take the position that they do not send their child to school to play but rather to work. Teachers often support this idea and report the work schedule to parents at open house and during conferences. It seemed to me that I had discovered a clear difference not only between cultures but in attitude toward the learning process in beginning reading/writing. Play is an integral part of learning--not play in the recreational sense but play as an outgrowth of an experience. Certainly early childhood educators in the United States have never lost sight of the value of play. Yet I wonder whether this is true in some elementary schools. Perhaps our penchant for work and the Puritan work ethic has made us lose sight of the value of play.

At any rate in Italy, children giuoco-"play"-to an educational end. This should be pleasurable yet meaningful in the sense of learning beginning reading and writing.

Conclusion

Italian children learn to read and write effectively. While emphasis is placed on writing first, these two communication processes

are never separated. They are a natural outgrowth of school experience and represent the focus of the curriculum at least in the first years of the elementary school. Contrast this with educational practice in the United States where reading may be taught at 10:00 in the morning and writing at 2:00 in the afternoon. Emphasis in reading instruction may be a discrete set of reading skills taught developmentally. Perhaps we have something to learn from Italian education where reading and writing instruction are correlated and where emphasis on writing precedes emphasis on reading.

Italian school children giuoco to educational ends. This experience is pleasurable and contributes directly to student learning. Less intensity and stress seems to exist in Italian schools as children learn to read and write. Contrast this with many American classrooms where work is emphasized and where we often find great stress on students and teachers.

Learning to read efficiently is a goal of both the United States and Italian schools. Perhaps we can learn from the Italian experience.

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